

COVID-19

More Oregonians buying food direct from farms during virus

CSA, a direct farm-to-consumer model, is booming during COVID-19

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

VENETA, Ore. — New unemployment claims in Oregon catapulted nearly 1,500% the last week of March, according to the Oregon Employment Department. But for Brandon Huff and his wife, Phaedra, owners of Ambrosia Farm in Veneta, Ore., this is their busiest season yet.

Industry leaders say more people are buying directly from farms to avoid grocery store crowds, shorten the supply chain and secure a reliable food source at a time when store shelves are often empty.

"Everyone's getting laid off and talking on social media about chillin'," said Brandon Huff. "And over here, I'm busier than ever. It seems like agriculture is full speed ahead."

Experts say subscriptions to CSA — Community Supported Agriculture — have spiked the past few weeks. CSA is a partnership between a farmer and customer in which a customer pays for a membership share



Ambrosia Farm

Brandon Huff, co-owner of Ambrosia Farm in Veneta, Ore., says this is the busiest season yet for the farm's CSA.

in exchange for a weekly box of fresh produce, meat or other farm goods.

Ambrosia Farm runs a CSA program. Members pay a share price at the start of the growing season and receive weekly boxes of colorful cabbage, peppers, strawberries, spinach and more. The farm offers both delivery and pickup options.

"We're seeing a major uptick in CSA memberships," said Holly Hutchason, executive director of the Portland Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, or PACSAC.

In the past two weeks, RJ Ewing, operations manager for Deck Family Farm in Junction City, Ore., said the

farm's number of CSA members has leapt from 80 to 125.

Kelly Crane, executive director of the Oregon Farmers Markets Association and former owner of a 50-member CSA, said people may be seeking farm-direct food for a sense of stability.

"People are feeling a little food insecure," said Crane. "Having a relationship with a farmer committed to delivering food every week is reassuring."

Hutchason and Crane said people may also be choosing CSAs to sidestep grocery stores and distribution chains.

"I you're concerned about how many people are handling your food," said Crane, "buying direct from the farm



Ambrosia Farm

Produce from a CSA box at Ambrosia Farm in Veneta, Ore.

is the shortest imaginable supply chain."

Heidi Noordjik, Oregon State University's small farms coordinator, said she thinks CSAs are also gaining traction because more people are cooking at home and thinking about how they can support local businesses and producers.

CSA is unfamiliar to many consumers, said Hutchason, but it's also new to many farms.

Before the virus outbreak, said Hutchason, many small farms relied heavily on restaurant sales. With so many restaurants now closed or limited to take-out and delivery, Hutchason called the change a "huge loss for farmers."

Many of these farms, she said, have been forced to adapt by expanding or creating CSAs.

Laura Masterson, owner of 47th Avenue Farm in Port-

land, Ore., has run a CSA for 24 years and also sells to restaurants. Masterson said the farm has about twice as many CSA sign-ups now as this time last year, and after restaurants shut down, over 50 current members signed up for an extra weekly box of vegetables.

Aaron Nichols, co-owner of Stoneboat Farm in Hillsboro, Ore., said about 60% of sales are typically to restaurants—including about 300 pounds per week of salad greens. With restaurants closed, Nichols plans to double the number of available CSA shares. He predicts CSA crops won't be as profitable as restaurant crops but said he's "incredibly grateful" for the community support.

"Farms are responding to this crisis really creatively," said Crane of OFMA. "It's early enough in the season that they're trying to shift their models in advance of harvest."

Crane said across the state, numerous small farms have set up online ordering systems such as Barn2Door and Farmigo, coordinated home and curbside delivery options and created pick-up sites.

Many farms are also strategizing how to make CSA more affordable.

One common criticism of CSA is that payment is

often required up-front. For example, a payment for six months of produce may be due this spring to cover farmers' planting and other expenses.

In the midst of a pandemic, said PACSAC's Hutchason, more farms are creating payment options, such as smaller shares or payments by the week or month, for consumers who can't afford to pay up front.

"It's a huge stretch for farmers not to ask for the capital at the front of the season," said Hutchason. "It's a sacrifice. It shows their commitment to feeding their communities."

PACSAC, said Hutchason, processes SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, so consumers can use SNAP benefits to buy CSA shares and so farmers can focus on farming.

Double Up Food Bucks, a related program, allows farmers to offer up to \$200 in matching funds to subscribers who use SNAP to pay their shares.

"It's a big time of change for CSA," said Crane. "But small farmers are hustlers. They've gotta be. They're the original gig economists. They've always had to be innovative and responsive, so they're really well-oriented to pivot during a crisis to keep feeding society."

Egg prices surge as demand spikes

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Oakdell Egg Farms and other producers have been scrambling to meet retail demand that has spiked in recent weeks as consumers stock up on eggs during coronavirus-induced stay-at-home orders.

"Recently we've had to do some things we've never had to do to allocate product based on availability amid exceptional demand," said Cliff Lillywhite, Oakdell's president and co-owner, in a March 30 interview. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime situation."

Oakdell is the largest egg producer in the Intermountain West.

Shell egg prices have skyrocketed in the past month as demand shifted from foodservice and institutional channels to grocery stores. Retailers responding to the surge in at-home consumption had also been trying to stock up as Easter



Oakdell Egg Farms

Cliff Lillywhite of Oakdell Egg Farms says meeting new, much higher demand for retail eggs has been a major challenge.

approaches. Some shortages have occurred as a result.

USDA reported wholesale egg prices nearly doubled and in some cases nearly tripled between late February and late March. Midwest large white eggs delivered to warehouses sold for 87 cents per dozen on Feb. 28 compared to \$2.25 on March 27. California large bench-

mark eggs sold for \$1.66 on Feb. 28 and \$3.07 on March 27.

Lillywhite's company operates egg farms in Pasco, Wash.; Franklin, Idaho; and Lewiston, Utah, under the Oakdell and Rite-wood banners. He said on the company website that many stores "are now getting back to their normal supply of eggs, but some shortages may still occur

for a short period of time. ... We are doing our best to quickly resolve this issue to better meet your needs."

With foodservice essentially shut down, most meals are eaten at home, causing additional demand at grocery stores.

"This is the first time I can recall having to limit supply like we have in the last three weeks or so," he told Capital Press.

Lillywhite on March 26 advised retail clients that their egg sales could be 20-25% higher until schools reopen and social distancing is no longer an issue.

Oakdell should have enough to cover normal orders, "but the extraordinary demand and upcoming Easter have resulted in a plummeting, low national inventory of available eggs," he said.

National egg supplies are about a quarter below year-ago levels and at their lowest in several years, he said.

Farmers markets changing structure, seeing record sales during pandemic

Farmers markets attempt prepay and drive-thru options to keep industry alive and feed communities

right, so responsible."

Across Oregon, according to Crane of OFMA, farmers markets have been testing new strategies. The past few weeks, said Crane, markets have slashed unnecessary programs, kept sick workers home, used colored tape to keep people apart and set up hand-sanitizing stations.

By the end of March, said Heidi Noordjik, small farms coordinator at Oregon State University, some markets had switched to prepay and drive-thru options only.

OFMA recently hosted a statewide meeting over Zoom, a conference call platform, during which 45 market managers said they were interested in this new model.

"It's pretty breakneck speed," said Crane. "Transforming an industry overnight is not an easy task."

Melissa Streg, a farmer at Sun Love Farm and vendor at the Oregon City Farmers Market, said adjusting has been a challenge.

"It basically changed my business model overnight," said Streg. "But as a farmer, I have to adapt to changing situations all the time."

Streg, who is pregnant, said although she misses the closer interactions with customers, she's grateful for the new practices at a time when she's "not comfortable selling in the traditional market setting."

Other farmers have applauded the new system.

Gus Liszka, co-owner of Naked Acres Farm in Portland, Ore., is trying to keep up with record meat sales. She said she appreciates the changes Hillsdale Market, where she is a vendor, has made by also switching to prepay and pick-up-only. Liszka is also a vendor at Hollywood Market, where pre-order options are still in progress.

"We farmers want to be safe, too," she said. "Frankly, I'm scared of handling cash."

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

OREGON CITY, Ore. — At the Oregon City Farmers Market last Saturday, rain battered canopies, vendors wore masks and gloves, and customers picked up prepaid food drive-thru style.

Despite the unusual scene, according to market co-manager Jackie Hammond-Williams, vendors are experiencing record sales during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Statewide, farmers markets are adopting safety procedures and seeing a huge spike in sales, said Kelly Crane, executive director of the Oregon Farmers Market Association.

"We're seeing a decrease in visitation but a dramatic increase in sales, as people send fewer family members to market but buy more," said Crane. "As people are experiencing bare grocery store shelves, they're turning to their local supply chain to fill those gaps."

Consumers say they are choosing farmers markets to avoid grocery stores, shorten the supply chain, eat fresh produce, secure a dependable food source in a time of insecurity and support local producers.

"My husband has compromised lungs, so we've taken the quarantine very seriously, and we're not going to grocery stores," said April Geiger, customer of the Oregon City Farmers Market. "When the market rolled out an app to prepay and had us drive through to pick up the food, I thought, 'This is the way to go.' It felt so

California FFA transitions to virtual state convention

By GEORGE PAVLEN
Capital Press

GALT, Calif. — Much like its neighbors in Oregon, the California FFA State Convention is going virtual.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced California FFA to cancel its regularly scheduled convention April 23-26 in Anaheim, where approximately 7,000 members from 338 chapters across the state were expected to gather for meetings, competitions and a celebration of the year's accomplishments.

Instead, the association is planning a virtual event with sessions streamed

online to comply with state and federal social distancing requirements.

Oregon FFA did something similar earlier this month, live-streaming video over Facebook, which drew thousands of views.

"Our primary focus is student safety," said Matt Patton, executive director of the California FFA Association, Foundation and Alumni. "There was no way we could bring students together in the current climate. It's just not ethical or safe."

Patton said it would not be feasible to reschedule an in-person convention given the fluidity and uncertainty of the situation. Schools and businesses across the West have closed to prevent

spreading COVID-19, and California Gov. Gavin Newsom has ordered all residents to stay at home except for essential needs, such as going to the grocery store or pharmacy.

That leaves a virtual convention as the best option going forward, said Dane White, an agriculture teacher at Galt High School near Sacramento and assistant state FFA advisor.

White said California FFA has reached out to several other states whose conventions were canceled due to coronavirus — including Oregon FFA, which streamed speeches and retiring addresses from state FFA officers earlier this month over Facebook Live.

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